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## DESIRE AND ITS FACILITATORS IN CERVANTES' *LOS TRABAJOS DE PERSILES Y SIGISMUNDA*

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Cervantes' winding tale *Los trabajos de Persiles y Sigismunda* (1618) of the the devout Catholic couple Periandro and Auristela, steadfast in their commitment to each other and to their faith despite the untoward incidents with the barbarians or alienated Spaniards living on the periphery of civilization, is strongly suggestive for a contemporary Europe struggling to understand the phenomenon of migrants.<sup>1</sup> Ironically, the variety of sociological types in *Persiles* hearkens to a century earlier than the one Cervantes wrote in, when the European imagination was still grappling with the human varieties that came into play after the discovery of America. John Elliott has commented on the apparent slowness of Europe to absorb the novelty of the New World population and has pointed out that even the encounter with Islam during the Middle Ages continued to be incomprehensible in the sixteenth century when Cervantes was fleshing out his text (Elliott, 1970). In the *Persiles*, most protagonists except the leading pair, display gradations of difference from the desired Catholic ideal. Their Otherness is a holdall of the recessive traits of preceding centuries. George Mariscal in his analysis of the work has described this aspect as the confidence of the State in being able to demarcate at this historical juncture, what was Spanish and and

<sup>1</sup> "Casi no se ha dado ni un paso desde la época del *Persiles*: Ninguno de los problemas expuestos en el texto habiendo hallado hasta hoy una solución suficiente o definitiva, descubrimos que no solamente se trata de un texto de suma actualidad, pero del texto de Cervantes que —de repente— se revela ser tal vez el más cercano de nuestra "sensibilidad" (Nerlich, 1998: 161).

<sup>2</sup> "I believe that in a period situated during the reigns of Phillip II and III, a vast project was undertaken in writing to rethink what "Spanishness" might

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what was not.<sup>2</sup> Uncontrollable desire, pacts with the devil and religious insecurity are all characteristics of protagonists who have been estranged from the Catholic heartland or are insufficiently unacculturated. In this scheme, minority religions are the most likely to harbour witches. As Isabel Lozano Renieblas has reminded us, Cervantes appropriates material from history to construct easily identifiable prototypes – deviant figures that the reading public could identify with (Renieblas, 1998: 46). Thus, no single figure incarnates Cervantes' ideas on misfits and aberrants, they are amalgams of inconformist attitudes that could find no place in sixteenth century Spain and Europe. Rebels and libertines like Clodio and his companion Rosamunda who speak uncomfortable truths are exiled from England. A wise protagonist like Mauricio warns his daughter the young and carefree Transila to be circumspect and leave well alone any doubts she might have about the relationship of the saintly Periandro and Auristela, the embodiment of the Catholic ideal. For these reasons Cervantes' "novel of Christian romance"<sup>3</sup> arouses sympathy for those who were left out of Paradise – the non Christians, witches and libertines. In the opinion of this writer Cervantes manages to show these characters as real flesh and blood types with a humanity of their own despite their contrast to the angelic leading couple.<sup>4</sup>

Early in the novel, Taurisa tells Periandro of demon worshipping barbarians who have kept her as a slave. In a scene that resonates with New World encounters, these barbarians with their interpreter accost Periandro who is disguised as a woman, carry him off to a room and invite him to eat with gestures.

mean. The emergence of "new" groups of people – indios, indianos, mestizos or criollos and others who were made visible through the contact with America – sufficiently problematized the idea of the social body so that the frontiers marking cultural inclusion or exclusion had to be radically realigned (Mariscal, 1990: 93-102).

<sup>3</sup> Forcione (1972).

<sup>4</sup> In this context Aurora Egido says, "Sin negar altos grados de idealización geográfica al *Persiles*, hay que convenir en que Cervantes relativiza y cuestiona la utopía como ilusión pura, deshaciendo los tópicos que la historia en general y las misceláneas en particular habían concedido a la topografía y a las razas estableciendo una dicotomía tradicional entre civilización y barbarie" (Egido, 1998: 125).

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Así como puso los pies en la ínsula Periandro, muchos bárbaros, a porfía, le tomaron en hombros, y, con muestras de infinita alegría le llevaron a una gran tienda que, entre otras, muchas pequeñas, en un apacible y deleitoso prado estaban puestas, todas cubiertas de pieles de animales cuales domésticos, cuales selváticos. La bárbara que había servido de intérprete de la compra y venta no se le quitaba del lado, y con palabras y en lenguaje que él no entendía, le consolaba. [...] tendieron por el suelo pieles curtidas, olorosas, limpias y lisas de animales, para que de manteles sirviesen, sobre las cuales arrojaron y tendieron sin concierto ni policía alguna, diversos géneros de frutas secas, y sentándose él y algunos de los principales bárbaros que allí estaban, comenzó a comer y a convidar por señas a Periandro que lo mismo hiciese (Cervantes, 1962: 1535).

Their welcome quickly changes to anger as Bradamiro one of the barbarians who has fallen in love with Periandro who is disguised as a woman decides to free him and is killed by the governor which eventually leads to a fire in the barbarian encampment. The scene of the skirmish amongst the barbarians is indicative of their quicksilver change of temperament. The barbarian leader dies in the fight and there is a free for all. The change in mood from one of gaiety to war is reminiscent of the Middle Ages so evocatively portrayed by Johan Huizinga. The intermingling of the smell of blood and roses and the substitution of any notion of justice by revenge and hatred points to a double genealogy for Cervantes' text : the New World and Europe's own past (Huizinga, 1988: 30-34).

A connection can be made between the references to the language of the barbarians and lack of civility and rough ways. During the Renaissance as Walter D. Mignolo has shown difference was made to appear as wrong or less (Mignolo, 1995: 5, 31-34). Furthermore there was a complicity between language and religion. From 1492 onwards, during the last of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance, reconquering territories and imposing the language became imperatives.

Consequent to the encounter with the barbarians, Periandro, Auristela and their entourage meet the father and son duo of barbarians who can speak Spanish and whom they sup with. The language spoken makes all the difference because although the dishes "ni fueron de plata ni de Pisa [...] y unas cortezas de árboles un poco más agradable que de corcho fueron los vasos." Yet the barbarian speaker of moderately noble parents is Spanish born and almost

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educated "Llegué a las puertas de la Gramática, que son aquellas por donde se entra a las demás ciencias..." (Cervantes, 1962: 1539). Antonio the elder has fought in the army of Charles the 5<sup>th</sup> in Europe and returned home with honors but due to a trivial fight with another noble who continues to pursue him he finds himself in barbarian lands. He has married a barbarian woman who he taught Spanish and made a Catholic. "... hame enseñado su lengua y yo a él la mia, y en ella asimismo me enseñó la ley católica cristiana..." (1543). They have two children Antonio and Constanza who have also been christened and baptized but the first will fall prey to the designs of Rosamunda because of his improvised and haphazard Christian upbringing. A borderline acculturated case, the younger Antonio however has better luck as compared to those who have heard the Word and are backsliders like the couple Clodio and Rosamunda.

These are the distinctions and oppositions that Cervantes foregrounds in *Persiles*. With this mix of characteristics, the protagonists find themselves in northern lands free to develop their ex-centricities away from the tutelage of Catholic Spain. They are what people expect them to be: existing prototypes of the age Cervantes lived in and embedded in the history of those times.<sup>5</sup>

The first irremissibly aberrant character is the witch or the older woman who in return for marriage offers to help Rutilio de Sena get out of jail. The unfortunate man from Sena fell in love with the student he was giving dance lessons to. He elopes with her but the girl's powerful father manages to get him sentenced to death. As Rutilio ruefully says, "el amor no da baratos sus gustos" words which will be prophetic for his later trajectory as well (Cervantes 1962: 1546). The episode has all the ingredients for the description of sorcery: desperation of a needy soul, Rutilio and the witch flying in the air to escape, transfiguration of the witch into a wolf. In the discussion about witches a few pages later there are contrasting opinions. Arnaldo the prince of Denmark, a positive figure but yet a resident of northern climes and hence susceptible to such tales, inclines towards Rutilio's

<sup>5</sup> "Cervantes [...] construye personajes de ficción sobre los cimientos de personas históricas [...]. El tipo se caracteriza por su pintoresquismo y por su orientación hacia valores concretos de una época dada. Esto es, el tipo se teje con el entorno objetual y representa una postura pasiva de la personalidad colectiva. Y esto es lo que hace Cervantes. No dice cómo son los españoles, portugueses, franceses o polacos: los pone a actuar y de acuerdo con el tópico se comportan" (Lozano Renieblas, 1998: 46).

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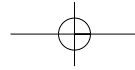
version and beliefs as he has heard that in England the king turned into a crow but Clodio, a cynic laughs off the tale and Mauricio the elderly ascetic who swears by his Catholic faith but dabbles in astrology advises Rutilio not to believe in witches. As he explains,

[...] porque la fuerza de los hechizos de los maléficos y encantadores, que los hay, nos hace ver una cosa por otra; y quede desde aquí sentado que no hay gente alguna que mude de otra su primera naturaleza (Cervantes, 1962: 1564).

Mauricio's reasons for dissuading Rutilio are different from Clodio's who completely rejects the story. Quoting "God" in Leviticus Mauricio says, "No seáis agoreros ni deis crédito a los sueños, porque no a todos es dado el entenderlos" (1566). Given his standing amongst those present, his position is important for later developments when evil in the form of Zenotia once again comes in the guise of a facilitator of desire and temptress. These are the characters that Auristela and Periandro meet in their travels, the types that Huizinga classifies as those of the Middle Ages : ascetics like Mauricio who advise princes and are half astrologers and preachers, witches who spread terror.

We get information about Zenotia through the manner in which she introduces herself to Antonio. Entreating him not to be afraid of her, she claims kinship with him because they both speak Spanish: "...mira que te hablo español, que es la lengua que tú sabes, cuya conformidad suele engendrar amistad entre los que no se conocen" (1594). Zenotia is quite extraordinary in her truthfulness about herself and her work. She boasts of her powers as an *encantadora* and *maga* and distances herself from the *hechiceras* who she claims never work for the good of anyone. Hers is a science based on the stars and on Nature but she confesses that the latter often lead her kind towards more evil than good. However this happens only because desire is obstinate. In questions of changing the natural course of things she admits that her powers are limited.<sup>6</sup> The reader almost begins to understand and sympathise with

<sup>6</sup> "Pero como la Naturaleza parece que nos inclina antes al mal que al bien, no podemos tener tan a raya los deseos, que no se deslicen a procurar el mal ajeno; que ¿quién quitará al airado y ofendido que no se vengue? ¿Quién al amante desdeñado que no quiera, si puede, reducir a ser querido del que le aborrece? Puesto que en mudar las voluntades, sacarlas de su quicio, como esto es ir contra el libre albedrío no hay ciencia que lo pueda, ni virtud ni hierbas que lo alcancen" (Cervantes, 1962: 1594-5).



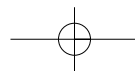
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her profession as well as with her escape from Spain and the Inquisition.

La persecución de los que llaman inquisidores en España me arrancó de mi patria, que, cuando se sale por fuerza de ella, antes se puede llamar arrancada que salida. Vine a esta isla por extraordinarios rodeos, por infinitos peligros, casi siempre, como si estuvieran cerca, volviendo la cabeza atrás, pensando que me mordían las faldas los perros (Cervantes, 1962: 1595).

So intense is her longing to belong and to be accepted that after speaking to him in his own language, she promises Antonio that she can be all things to him, make herself beautiful if he finds her ugly and even procure more wealth than the thirty thousand escudos she is offering him. The immature Antonio fends her off ("lleno de confusión, como si fuera la más retirada doncella del mundo"), resists her advances and in true barbarian fashion kills Clodio with an arrow in the process. The infuriated Zenotia retaliates by making Antonio fall ill but recants after being threatened by Antonio the father. Zenotia ever active turns her attention to Policarpo a Catholic widower, the king of the island where the group has taken refuge. Policarpo is smitten by Auristela and wishes to make her his wife and give his two daughters a stepmother. Feeling nothing to be ashamed of, he expresses his desire to his daughter Sinforosa and advises her to think of Periandro as a future husband. But the narrator has other ideas about Policarpo's intentions and informing us of the age difference between the two terms them "lascivious desires" (1591). In the midst of all this and with no concrete reply from Auristela, Zenotia eggs Periando on, feeding his insecurity about his love by telling him that he has no chance against Periandro and Arnaldo because of his age and warns him not to let them the group leave the island. The desperate Policarpo listens to her "la rabia de la endemoniada enfermedad de los celos se le apoderó del alma" and Zenotia emboldened also parallelly plots her own revenge against Antonio who scorned her. She entreats Policarpo to stop their departure but the latter still hoping to win Auristela by fair means, is reluctant to offend Arnaldo who is after all a prince and part of the departing group. But the energetic and pushy Zenotia tells him he will be absolved because,

Las culpas que comete el enamorado en razón de cumplir su deseo no lo son, en razón de que no es suyo ni es él el que las comete, sino el amor, que manda su voluntad (Cervantes, 1962: 1606).



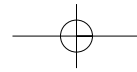
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The incident ends tragically. Policarpo gives in to Zenotia's bad advice, sets fire to his palace in order to create confusion and then rob Auristela but his plans are leaked. Zenotia is finally hanged by the people of the island. After this foreseeable denouement, even liberal minded readers who might have found a place for Zenotia in their world view find their sympathies ebbing in the face of her persistence and manipulation of Policarpo. She has taken her rejection by Antonio as an affront to her power and her profession and in order to prove the worth of her science, she stubbornly goads on Policarpo's desire in the face of overwhelming odds. It has to be said of Zenotia that she sets herself no easy goal but her rage and desire for revenge blind her to her minuscule chances of success. The tragic destinies of Clodio and Zenotia and Policarpo make one wonder however as to which kind of desire is legitimate for the world in which Cervantes lived in and which was not. After all, Arnaldo and the Duke of Nemurs also nurture an impossible love for Auristela and are not castigated in the same way. But the latter two are not precipitate and wait for the turn of fortune while Zenotia feels a confidence in her art and her ability to get what she wants.<sup>7</sup>

In *The World of the Witches* Julio Caro Baroja makes the case that the intervention of the witch becomes necessary when age makes the desired object seem impossible (Baroja, 2001: 34). This would explain the case of Hipolita the aging rich and beautiful noblewoman in Rome who tries to entice Periandro with her wealth and hospitality. But when she makes overtures of love and he flees, she accuses him of robbery and he is brought before the judge where she comes to her senses and makes a clean breast of her love to the astonishment of the former who attributes her unseemly behaviour to her "disparates lascivos". Her love for Periandro undoes Hipólita because at the beginning of the chapter the narrator is lush with praise,

No era posible que fuese estimada en poco de quien la conocía, porque con la hermosura encantaba, con la riqueza se

<sup>7</sup> Maria Soledad Carrasco places Zenotia in the category of upper class Moriscos (Carrasco Urgoiti, 2005: 73-90). Zenotia of course displays considerable agency and confidence which could be due to her class background or to the generic characterization of the witch who had an overdeveloped personality with a propensity towards evil, as Julio Caro Baroja has mentioned. In general according to the latter wuthor the world of desire was the world of magic (Caro Baroja, 2001: 32).



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hacía estimar, y con la cortesía si así se puede decir se hacía adorar. Cuando el amor se viste de estas tres calidades, rompe los corazones de bronce, abre las bolsas de hierro y rinde las voluntades; y más si a estas tres cosas se les añade el engaño y la lisonja, atributos convenientes para las que quieren mostrar a la luz del mundo sus donaires (Cervantes, 1962: 1699).

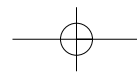
That she has been irresistible so far can be gauged from the last line but since she is thwarted she becomes more desperate. She orders the wife of Zabulón a Jew and a resident of Rome to put a spell on Auristela who withers away. But then Periandro's health weakens out of anguish and Hipolita fearing for his life asks Julia to remove the spell. The narrator's attitude is curious - a bewilderment with what is happening, about the powers ascribed to witches as well as their own sense of self. It proves Isabel Lozano's hypothesis about Cervantes' prototypical characters: the author seems to be shrugging his shoulders about popular beliefs.

Hízolo así la judía, como si estuviera en su mano la salud o la enfermedad ajena, o como si no dependieran todos los males que llaman de pena de la voluntad de Dios, como no dependen los males de culpa; pero Dios, obligándole, si así se puede decir, por nuestros mismos pecados, para castigo de ellos, permite que pueda quitar la salud ajena esta que llaman hechicerías, con que lo hacen las hechiceras (Cervantes, 1962: 1706).

If Zenotia was a facilitator and also acted for herself, Hipolita hires a professional to get her objective. But facilitators of desire were things of the past of the Middle Ages and thus Julia and Zenotia are also made to belong to minority faiths whose time had ended in Spain.

Professions of love between unequals is also frowned upon in the novel. Rosamunda who says of herself, "me dejo ir con la corriente de mis gustos" (Cervantes, 1962: 1570), is damned because she makes advances to Antonio. Her companion, the wild living Clodio who has been expelled from England because of his criticism and slander of the king also suffers the ignominy of being insulted by Auristela for the letter he writes her about his devotion. In the midst of all this the wise Mauricio gives advice to his daughter Transila to be ever cautious on her judgements and pronouncements about others' love lives.

—Mira, hija Transila —dijo Mauricio—, que las condiciones de amor son tan diferentes como injustas, y sus leyes tan muchas como variables; procura ser tan discreta que no apures los





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pensamientos ajenos, ni siquiera saber más de nadie de aquello que quisiere decirte... (Cervantes, 1962: 1575).

And yet a few lines later when comforting Auristela the paragon of virtue and goodness, conservative Mauricio says, "que en ningunas otras acciones de la naturaleza se ven mayores milagros ni mas continuos que en las del amor..." Periandro and Auristela pretend to be brother and sister in order to be able to chastely complete their pilgrimage to Rome but their pretended relationship has already come under suspicion by those who desire them. Clodio is paid a backhanded compliment by narrator because of his intelligence and wit.

[...] que el tonto y simple ni sabe murmurar ni maldecir; y aunque no es bien decir bien mal, como ya otra vez se ha dicho, con todo esto alaba al maldiciente discreto; que la agudeza maliciosa no hay conversación que no la ponga en punto y de sabor, como la sal a los manjares (Cervantes, 1962: 1585).

He has to be eliminated in the plot because he refuses to recognize any kind of authority nor any sanctity in relationships. On his own admission he has been a strong critic of those in power (tengo un cierto espíritu satírico y maldiciente, una pluma veloz y una lengua libre [...] no me ataban la lengua prisiones, ni enmudecían destierros, ni atemorizaban amenazas (1538). In the straitened circumstances of exile, his observations fix on the strange love between the star couple Periandro and Auristela and the thrall they leave many in. He tries to disabuse Arnaldo of his notions that the two are related by blood but Arnaldo says he does not want to believe him. The unfortunate Clodio tries to sow doubts amongst those, who to avoid discomfort and momentary disillusionment, do not want to go beyond mere appearances and since nothing will deter him he dies tragically.

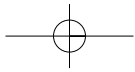
In their travels Periandro and Auristela meet other rootless migrants and refugees. Some like Feliciano de la Voz who rejects the man her father has arranged for her and has a child by her lover have a happy end when the family meets up again. Remarking on this episode Auristela says that her sorrowful case should serve as an example to other young ladies who get carried away by emotion. Others like Isabel Castrucho who has been temporarily deserted by a lover who gave her no explanations suffer pangs of emotion that are so incomprehensible to those around her that they consider her possessed though she keeps repeating, "Mis amorosos pensamientos son los demonios que me atormentan" (Cervantes, 1962: 1682).

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The lives of these characters are in stark contrast to the eerie serenity of Periandro and Auristela who soldier on despite the suffering they encounter and often as not leave in their wake due to their own ambivalent or rather false relationship of brother and sister. They are a fitting allegorical pair representative of a place and time when transcendence to higher ideals meant annulling multicultural reality.

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